

Continuing Conversations

Post-pandemic teaching, learning, and assessment policies and practices in HECA colleges

In 2021, the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) undertook an analysis of the sectoral response to Covid-19. The processes and practices evidenced across the sector, during a time of great disruption, enabled the system to transform almost overnight. The analysis and reflection by staff and students, as part of HECA's Connected Conversations project, provided a snapshot of insights from educators and students teaching, learning, and supporting learning in HECA colleges during the pandemic.

Introduction

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) was an active partner in the 2021 National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Next Steps project, which explored, at a national level, the teaching, learning, and assessment developments implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021).

HECA also undertook its own analysis of its member colleges' response to the pandemic, titled Connected Conversations (HECA, 2021). The processes and practices used across the sector, during a time of great disruption and change, enabled the system to transform almost overnight. The review and reflection undertaken by staff and students, as part of HECA's Connected Conversations research project, captured a snapshot of insights from educators and students on the teaching, learning, assessment, and learning support activities used in HECA colleges during the pandemic.

The aim of the research was to identify the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (TLA) practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning due to Covid-19, and how these were experienced by educators and students in HECA colleges. The research also looked to identify the quality assurance and enhancement interfaces needed to facilitate the applied TLA practices and ensure ongoing academic standards.

To identify the specific TLA practices used, how these changed in relation to earlier practices, and what innovations had occurred, the following research questions were explored:

- I. What were educators' experiences of delivering these TLA practices?
- II. What were students' experiences of these TLA practices?
- III. What were student support staff experiences of these TLA practices?



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This research endorsed HECA educators' demonstration of reflective practice, responding to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic with agility and purpose. As a result, there is a wealth of rich information that shows what worked well and should be kept, what needs to be improved upon or developed further, and what needs to be dropped. These *continuing conversations* are crucial in facilitating a shared vision of what the post-pandemic higher education landscape could and should look like.

Pandemic changes

As confirmed in the Connected Conversations project (HECA, 2021):

the pandemic brought change and disruption that unearthed a wide range of taken-for-granted truths in higher education. How and when students learn, how educators facilitate this learning, and the spaces within which this happens, has changed. Learning in an online environment does not preclude being on-campus. The campus experience is now, more than ever, multidimensional and must reflect both the diversity of teaching and learning activities and the social fabric that knits contemporary community values for all staff and students.

As the academic community redesigned the learning experience, to maintain provision, colleges further developed their capacity to deliver programmes using blended and other online learning models. This ignited a conversation about the shared definition and understanding of *blended learning*, and how this might best be interpreted and applied.

With the return to face-to-face teaching, many HECA students signalled a preference to retain elements of online learning. Many programmes accommodated this, where possible and applicable. For example, some modules used a flipped-classroom approach, where material is loaded to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), with class time dedicated to active learning activities to engage students, or where communities of practice and peer sharing were implemented in novel ways using supporting technologies.

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HECA students quickly adapted to and embraced blended and hybrid learning environments. There is a strong preference in the HECA sector to retain and develop both these programme delivery models, along with a *fully online programme* facilitation. The ongoing online programme project in Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), to support programme development and validation and to ensure effectiveness and integrity for online learners, is a positive development in this area.

In maintaining *programme review, revalidation, and validation* activities during the pandemic, HECA colleges engaged with QQI and peers to develop an online process for conducting panel events, through an online conferencing application. The processes have been embraced by college

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management and programme teams, the panels themselves, and the validating bodies. One benefit is that virtual events support attendance by a broader geographical spread of panel members, including international participants. Electronic provision of documentation supports responsiveness, sustainability, and economic aims. Virtual attendance also eases scheduling of stakeholder attendance, without significant disruption to their routines. To mainstream this initiative, the process needs to be formally integrated into colleges' and accreditation bodies' quality assurance procedures.

Colleges must also continue to consider how best to support the many *flexible and varied* ways that students engage with their learning. Spaces need to be created to support social and learning interactions. There is a need to reiterate and redefine the broadest possible definition of these spaces, for example, social engagement across campuses, both on and offline. The design and co-creation of these spaces between students and staff are crucial.

The experiences of remote teaching and learning encouraged timely conversations about assessment. Students and staff continue to value assessment as a major area worthy of focus and effort in the changing teaching and learning landscape. Supporting a *choice and variety of assessments* involves student consultation, awareness of the role of universal design for learning (UDL), a commitment to authentic assessment, and a critical evaluation of the suitability of chosen (existing) assessment methods. The pandemic precipitated urgent redesign of assessment, to facilitate learners' demonstration of their learning efforts without compromising on quality.

As we develop and enhance curricula, and the spaces in which these are delivered, we must renew our commitment to develop *student learning supports* to help students develop self-regulation skills, promoting student agency and autonomy as critical skills required for academic success, while also supporting student engagement and collaboration. The provision of these supports is a clear response to the changing learning landscape, with blended delivery models and the changing nature of how students manage their learning. Today's higher education learner needs to respond to different challenges from those in the past, and curricula must be designed with this in mind.

Challenges and future needs

New challenges exist in preserving and promoting *academic integrity*, at a time when essay mills and the use of social media to advertise these services and to actively target vulnerable learners are very real and present threats to all students. The development of more resources is urgently required to guide, inform, and support staff and students in this area, supporting a prevention-first model. Sharing of best practice across the sector, such as currently supported by the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), will once again be needed to strengthen this messaging.

During the pandemic, HECA colleges adopted an agile approach to trialling *new digital resources* and software, with one educator saying they had access to over 300 technologies to support learner engagement. There is a recognised need to continue to provide associated resources and facilitate guidance and training opportunities which will empower educators to produce teaching and assessment materials that enhance the learning experience, while making the best use of the technology available.

With the transition to online teaching and assessment, and learner support, *the communication modes between educators and students*, and within staff peer groups, also moved online. The resulting shift in communication practices needs to be evaluated to identify future needs. A significant *increase in administrative workload* was reported for educators during emergency remote teaching, driven primarily by redesigning assessments and an increased level of individual correspondence with students. The blurring of boundaries between formal and informal communication was noticeable in student-to-educator communications, as was the expectation for responsiveness.

Connected conversations (HECA, 2021) noted that *academic supervision* and other one-to-one engagement flourished in the online setting, benefiting from the ability to schedule meetings more easily, share files, and offer online feedback, improving the overall supervisor-to student relationship and workflow. Examination and development of communication policies and practices at institutional and programme level should ensure the continued appropriateness of communication and engagements, and support peer networks and communities of practice.

Conclusion

The Connected Conversations project has shown the need for ongoing dialogue, cross-collaboration, and meaningful partnership among all higher education institutions, to support knowledge sharing and mutual support, to co-create solutions to our collective challenges. The HECA Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) continues to carry out the conversations that arise from the mutual sharing of experiences in member colleges, with specific plans in place to foster that activity for the current academic year.

Opening channels of dialogue acts as an agent of change. Events of the past two years have highlighted the community value of HECA providers to communicate authentically and openly with each other, harnessing lessons learned and building a collective consciousness that feeds into every aspect of the teaching, learning, and assessment landscape. Maintaining this momentum, as we look to the future, is critical for the continued changes, challenges, and celebrations that are yet to come. Continued sectoral partnership is an essential condition in ensuring that post-pandemic teaching, learning, and assessment in Irish higher education are based on the sector's real-time experiences, and continue to transform and enhance the learner experience.